

# TATTOOING IN NEW-YORK.

## A VISIT PAID TO THE ARTIST.

HOW THE WORK IS DONE—THE BOOK OF PATTERNS—THE CHARACTER OF THE CUSTOMERS—WOMEN WHO WANT TO BE TATTOOED—OTHER PROFESSORS OF THE ART—A LADY TATTOOED AGAINST HER WILL.

Some two years ago, when drifting among Nantucket shoals, the fishing smack rocking gently in the swell, the cod suddenly ceased biting. We had caught fish in plenty for the day, and now came the task of cleaning them, prior to putting them in ice for the New-York market. Three brawny sailors bared their arms to the shoulder, seized their knives, and cod were decapitated and disemboweled at the rate of five a minute.

It was then that, for the first time, I heard the name of a distinguished artist. Said one sailor to his mate: "Bill, that's the prettiest picture on your arm I ever see. I have been a kind of envying you that marking. You see, mine was done by a ship-mate as was most only a beginner, and ain't of much account."

"Yes," replied Bill, with evident pleasure, "it's been admired before," and the man looked with pride at his arm. "It's a sailor and his own true love, what he always leaves behind him and don't see no more, and it was put on by the best tattooer in the United States."

"Which 'is name is Martin Hildebrandt," chimed in a Nantucket fisherman. "Oh, I've seen his work before. I reckon I am a judge of that kind of thing. I guess I have seen just as big tattooing as the next man, having been once wrecked off the New-Zealand coast, where the natives pass most of their leisure beautifying themselves. I once clapped eyes on an old chief of seventy, that had been undergoing his marking ever since he was a baby, and all the picture that was to have been printed on him wasn't done yet. Maybe if he had lived until he was a hundred he might have been finished up. There wasn't a square inch on him that wasn't laid out in lozenges, squares, triangles, and circles, with all kinds of zig-zag lines running in regular order all over him. The only thing about it where them savages ain't up to us, is in the skin. Being not exactly black, but pretty dark, you can't tint a New-Zealander or a Kanacker like you can a white man. On a New-Zealander the color has to be put in heavy, and it ain't no joke. I've seen 'em doing it. They takes a kind of little saw, made of wood with a lot of shark's teeth set in it, and they taps that on the man's hide with a small mallet, and the blood comes every time. Yes, Bill, I seed your markings when you rolled your sleeves up to pull me on board, and I says to myself, if it wasn't Martin Hildebrandt as made them markings, then it ain't nobody else."

The name of this distinguished master of the art of tattoo remained in my mind for some time, then gradually faded away, until recalled a day or so ago. Some curious friend, given to the contemplation of street signs, had reported that in South street, somewhere between Fulton Ferry and Catharine, he had seen on a bit of paper these words: "Tattooing done here." A careful search on my part to find the artist was unsuccessful. The policemen in the neighborhood had never seen such a sign, and a postman on the route declared "that no such person, he was sure, was to be found, or, at least, had no letters sent him." Determining not to be baffled, I pushed my inquiry to the fountain-head of all marine information, the Sailors' Exchange, where, in a moment, I was put on the right course, and presently found Mr. Martin Hildebrandt, at his atelier in Oak street, between Oliver and James.

For all the abandon of word painting perhaps men who write, never have greater scope given them than in their description of an artist's interior. Lambrequins, tapestries, coats of mail, old arms, quaint costumes, antique furniture, and miscellaneous *bric a brac* can be piled in in the most lavish way. Our artist's atelier was a tavern, with a well-sanded floor, and on the walls hung pictures of odalisques, a diploma asserting that some one was a member of the Ancient Order of Good Fellows, and there was a strange picture, topographically perfect, of the Lakes of Killarney, where at a glance the spectator, transmogrified into a bird, was supposed to be flitting over these blissful waters and taking in the whole perspective. Mr. Hildebrandt, with the true modesty of an artist, exhibited his book of drawings. All you had to do, in case you wanted to be marked for life, was to select a particular piece, and in a short time, varying from fifteen minutes to an hour and a half, you could, presenting your arm or your chest as an animated canvas to the artist, have transferred on your person any picture you wanted, at the reasonable price of from fifty cents to \$250. The subjects were various. If you were an Englishman, a Frenchman, a Swede, or a Dane, there was ready for you a young lady, entwining herself in the banners of her country, ready to leave the book, and stamp herself indelibly on your person for life. There were religious pieces, as the crucifixion, in true ascetic style, or it, on the contrary, you were a reckless sailor, and wanted a ballerine, there was a gay figurante, in remarkably short skirts, pirouetting on one toe, which could be worked into your flesh and blood. Masonic emblems, Odd Fellows' signs, the hand of good fellowship, faith, hope, and charity, sailors' rights, anchors, cannons, free trade, all more or less allegorically expressed, were all ready, when called for. There was one, representing a dolorous young lady reclining on a mausoleum, over which bent an umbrageous willow, which allowed a man, who had lost a relative, to bear perpetually on his person the remembrance of his loss. This seemed to me to be more or less touching, as an ineffaceable *memento mori*. "Is this often used, Mr. Hildebrandt?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, a favorite piece. I put it on quite frequently. You see a man has had his arm marked before by some one who did not understand much about it, and I use this to cover over the old tattooing. The willow being pretty big hides the old work."

The tools used were showed me. They consist of some half dozen No. 12 needles, bound together in a slanting form, which are dipped as the pricking is made into the best India ink or vermilion. The puncture is not made directly up and down, but at an angle, the surface of the skin being only pricked. "Bad material," said Mr. Hildebrandt, "never does good work. I use only the very best ink I can buy, paying \$1 50 an ounce for it. Common ink clouds and will not follow the thin lines I want when I shade. Sometimes I get a man with a beautiful white skin to work on, and it is a real pleasure I feel in seeing how rapidly my work sets and how it grows under my eyes."

"Are there many people who follow your calling?" I inquired.

"Some few in New-York, but not in a regular way, and not being artists or knowing how to draw, they do very bungling work. They come to me for designs, which I furnish them, but I am sorry to state, they cannot carry them out. In Boston there is a man called Brown; I do not think he does good work. He has no idea of form, and his lettering is very irregular. Now there is Lee, of Philadelphia, a left-handed man, a pupil of mine, but I regret to say his work is none of the best. There was a genius, however, in Chicago, a man whose real name was Farrell, who once was at West Point, who did wonderfully fine work, but he took to drinking and lost his skill. It does require a certain amount of quickness and habit. I can't make a man bare his arm and let me potter for a day over it. Every time I put in my needles, I know it must be right. I can't do any rubbing out. Once in, it stays there for life. Practice has made me proficient. A man selects a piece. I lay it out roughly in color on him—indicate it rather—and then I go ahead, hardly ever looking at my model. Sometimes there comes to me a man who don't like any of my pictures in my book, but is willing for me to invent something for him. That gives me, then, real pleasure. I don't know at first, what I will do, but I start somewhere generally with a shield, and the ideas come, so that I may safely state that my best work is not seen in my book of samples. "Yes," continued Mr. Hildebrandt, reflectively, "it is a pity we are restricted to only two colors, blue and red. If we could only get a green to work into a wreath, the contrast would be charming, but I am afraid it can't be done. Sailors," went on the artist, "of course I work on mostly, but there are plenty of mechanics, and especially farmers, who come to me. When a full-grown man comes to me for the first time to have himself tattooed, he is pretty nearly certain to come again for more. Once I had a man, who wanted just one little figure put on him, and was so pleased, as was his wife, who was with him, that before I got through with him I put eight distinct pieces on him for \$16, and was most all day before I had finished him up. Sometimes I have been sent for to meet a whole company of gentlemen—yes, sir, men of style, living in handsome houses—and I have tattooed the whole lot of them—some private kind of mark, which I won't mention. Once, two ladies called on me—real ladies. What did they want? Why, you wouldn't believe it! They wished to have their cheeks marked red—with a kind of bloom. They offered me no end of money if I would try it, but I refused. I was not sure that I could hit off the real color. Maybe if I had put on my color, and they had wanted to get rid of it, they would have abused me; for, once on, and ground into them, you must remember, it would have staid there until their dying day. About a year ago, a gentleman sent to me to come to him in a first-class hotel. Said he to me, "I have been hunting all over town for a sailor to tattoo me, and you have been recommended to me. I want you to do a job of work on me." "Where?" said I. He was a very handsome man, with as fine style as I ever

saw. "Right here," said he, pointing to his face. "I want you to put in a red band from my nose, on both sides, to the corner of my mouth—like a crescent—and I want a blue star on both cheeks and one in the middle of my chin." I thought the man was crazy, and declined. "Oh, I ain't out of my head," said he, "I am from the Indian Territory. I have been living among the Indians all my life, and a race with blue and red on it ain't a bit unnatural to me. It is a kind of necessity that I should be tattooed, so go ahead." Well, as he kind of insisted I went ahead. I did my very best, and made two big sweeps of red markings from his nose around to his mouth, and having laid out his cheeks put there the blue stars and one on his chin. It was good work and as true as a compass, and it suited him first rate. But I can't say it was pretty. It gave him an awful expression. Anyhow, he was satisfied, which was all I could ask. My busy time is in Summer, and I sometimes have not a moment to spare. In Winter, because sailors think they will take cold after marking, they don't have it done as much. However, I do more or less of it every day of the year. Mostly men come to me, and I work on them right here. Occasionally I go out, when the parties can't find it convenient to come. During the war times I never had a moment's idle time. I must have marked thousands of sailors and soldiers. Oh! you want to know about the crucifixion? I put it on very often. Religion don't make much difference, and it is on as many men as are not Catholics as are. The reason is this, that as there is a good deal of trading with the West Indies and South America, should a sailor die with this cross on him, he would be sure of having Christian burial. I remember two sailors, in a frigate I was serving on, as died in Callao. The one as was a Romanist hadn't no cross on him, and the other as wasn't of no religion at all had the crucifixion on him. The people on shore wouldn't have the Catholic buried in the regular cemetery, for we had to put him in the sand on the beach, while the other man that had the mark of the cross on him, they took all kind of pains with. I have known in a hospital in South America a man with the crucifixion on him nursed first rate, when another man was neglected who belonged to their religion. You tell me you heard of my name before? That does not surprise me. I am pretty well known all over the United States, and as I have been working steadily at it ever since 1846, I suppose there are thousands of my pictures walking around this world and pitching about on board of ships in all the known quarters of the globe. "You want to know how long it takes before a man gets over tattooing? Why, mostly in three days the prickings all get well. As I do it, with good ink, I never knew anybody to suffer the least from it. I have tried to see if I couldn't make some of my pictures all at once, by having a pattern stuck all over with needle points and doing it at the same time, but it was not successful."

Having given me in a quiet way all the details of his curious art, restraining the desire on my own part of having a remarkably pretty device, entitled "Young America," tattooed into my arm, I left Mr. Martin Hildebrandt the artist.

Some years ago, at a ball, I remember to have seen a very charming lady, on one of whose shapely arms a bit of sleeve trimmed with lace scarcely concealed a visible blue mark. Inquiring into the matter, I found that the lady was the daughter of a distinguished Southern statesman, the former Governor of a State. Before the war Gov. C—, accompanied by his daughter, had traveled in Northern Africa. One day, mounted on a rather fiery horse, who had been deprived of water for some time, the animal had made for a running stream, and floundering in a quicksand and thrown his lady rider. It happened that some Arab women were near, who, drawing the young lady from her perilous condition, carried her to their tent. Here she was undressed, all her European clothes were taken from her, and she was clad in complete Arab costume. In the act of unrobing the frightened girl, a woman, she remembered, had struck her quite a smart blow on the arm not far from the elbow, while another Arab woman, with a small earthenware pot, had daubed some black substance on her arm. Presently, when her father and the party arrived at the Arab camp, the young lady was returned without difficulty, the natives insisting that the whole performance was nothing but a joke. The American girl felt some slight soreness of the arm for a day or so, when it all passed away, but in a week a big blue butterfly, almost encircling the white arm, came out, and it was evident that the young lady had been tattooed for life with some Bedouin emblem.